Lessons From the Practice

House Calls and Ice Cream

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I CAN REMEMBER sitting in the back of my dad's 1953 Pontiac, wearing flannel pajamas and sparring with my sister over the exact location of the midpoint of the back seat. My dad was taking us with him on another house call. He had this big chrome floodlight that he would plug into the cigarette lighter as he approached the correct street. Using it, he would lean over and squint to view the addresses as he inched along from one tract home to the next. He would always say, "I'll be right back." And we would always reply, "Please don't be long, Daddy."

An interminable amount of time would pass as the two of us sat in that locked car somewhere in the San Fernando Valley night. Sometimes my dad would take so long, he would come out and find the two of us in tears. He would feel terrible and say, "I wasn't really that long, was I?" We would insist, "Yes, you were!" and busy ourselves wiping the tears from our eyes with the backs of our hands.

Our usual payment for an extra long wait in the car was a visit to the ice cream parlor for a hot fudge sundae.

"How much did they pay you, Daddy?" and "What did they have?" we would ask as we drove off in anticipation of our ice cream. Dad would answer the first question by pulling out a crisp $10 bill from his shirt pocket. In answering the second question, he would make no attempt to simplify technical medical terms. He would say, "nephritis," or "angina," or "status postmyocardial infarction." We would just reply, "Oh."

Growing up in our house, with my dad, made it easy to understand his concept of medical economics. Although he never discussed the issue, his feelings were clear: Practicing medicine should provide you with enough money to raise your family in a safe neighborhood, put your kids through college, and take the family on a vacation for one or two weeks a year. He truly loved his work, and, somewhat unwillingly, he retired when his office landlord wanted him to sign a long-term lease at the age of 72.

I now practice medicine as a dermatologist. In my office, in the small room where I do my laboratory work, there is a photograph of my dad hanging on the wall. It was taken over 40 years ago, and it has those familiar, broad venetian blinds in the background that were so popular then. Looking into Dad's soft eyes, I get a comfortable, warm feeling. I am reminded how lucky I am to have chosen such a wonderful profession.

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A $20 Life

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THE SOUND OF GUNFIRE was not unusual in the drug-ridden neighborhood. The car lurched forward and stopped against a utility pole, a young man slumped over the steering wheel. A woman exited the front passenger door and fled down the street. Then, all was quiet.

Birth and death are the coinage of existence. In my practice as a forensic pathologist, violent deaths are a common occurrence. Despite their frequency, I am still amazed by the often trivial precipitants. A man once shot his wife and daughter because they had persisted in serving him pork chops, which he could not chew because he lacked teeth. Another man shot his best friend in a drunken argument over how many dams there were on the lake where they were fishing. Life is cheap. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the competitive "business environment" of drug dealing.

I examined the young man from the automobile in the stillness of the autopsy room that Saturday morning and noted a small round entrance gunshot wound over the left temple. A simple hole. Surrounding the wound were the punctate abrasions of gunpowder stippling. "It's an intermediate-range gunshot wound," I told the detective, "a distance generally less than 2 to 3 feet."

The detective narrated briefly the story given by the woman passenger, who was a prostitute. The young man was a corrections officer who had just received his weekly paycheck. To celebrate with a night on the town, he first picked up the young woman. Together they drove to another neighborhood to purchase some cocaine. The young man circled a block several times while pricing the drug with various curbside dealers. He eventually settled into negotiations with one dealer and agreed to purchase 11 bags of cocaine at $20 a bag. He pulled a wad of $20 bills from his wallet, counted out 11, and handed them out through the window into the darkness, to the dealer. The dealer handed him the cocaine and counted his money. "Hey, man! I'm short $20," he exclaimed. "No you're not, I gave you 11 twenties," replied the young man. The argument lasted ten seconds until a supervising dealer stepped forward from against a building. "What's happening?" "He shorted me $20," said the curbside dealer. "Shoot him," authorized the more senior partner.

The detective had been at the death scene earlier in the morning, before the autopsy. I asked him what he had observed. "Not much, Doc. Just a $20 bill in the gutter."

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